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Site-Intensive Methods: Fenno and Scott in Search of a Coalition

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The methods that generally go under the labels ethnography and participant-observation occupy a somewhat awkward place in political science (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004). Our discipline lays claim to prominent, if rather isolated, examples of scholarly work based on these methods—with perhaps the two most widely read being Fenno’s *Home Style* (1978) and Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). A subset of empirical researchers has always been drawn to them, going back at least as far as the immediate post-WWII generation and presumably earlier (Banfield 1958). They are discussed on the occasional conference panel.¹ They are actively employed in much exciting research today, by themselves or in conjunction with other methods (examples include Adams 2003, Allina-Pisano, 2004, Bayard de Volo 2001, Cammett 2005 and 2007, Chen 2006, Galvan 2004, Morris MacLean 2004, Roitman 2004, Schatz 2004, Straus 2006, and Tsai 2007).

And yet, these methods remain marginal. I think it’s fair to say that they only occasionally crop up in methodology curricula. Even within the world of the APSA organized section on qualitative methods and the stimulating ferment that it has fostered in the past three years, they have shown up so far as a distant cousin. Very little in this vein appears on the 2006 Institute for Qualitative Research Methods (IQRM) syllabus, for example.² Two of the most important recent books on qualitative methods, while immensely useful to ethnographers and participant-observers, also seem to have been written without these approaches particularly in mind (George and Bennett 2004, Brady and Collier 2004).

What are the reasons for this marginality? Let me first mention a few obvious ones. Acquiring the skills needed to use these methods and then applying them is time consuming and costly, particularly when research is conducted in foreign-language settings. They are thus rather difficult to recommend in good conscience to the average graduate student who cares about minimizing time to completion. And, of course, other methods skills are much more in demand within the discipline as a whole.

But clearly there are other reasons, as well. Practitioners are split by apparent differences in epistemology, such as a perceived schism between “interpretivists” and “positivists,” and sometimes even seem to highlight these divides rather than bridge them (Yanow 2003, Schatz 2006). There is also a reluctance on the part of many to go beyond describing what

they did in their own research and prescribe sets of general procedures for others to follow. Efforts within political science to spell out explicitly (and promote) the benefits of these methods for the building and testing of theories have so far been limited. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there has been no real push to build a coalition behind the critical appreciation, application, and teaching of these methods.

Does marginality matter? Some people may not think so, but it seems clear that there are real costs to practitioners and to the discipline as a whole. Readers of our work lack a clear framework within which to understand, evaluate, and criticize it. It is perceived as alien, something that might be appropriate in other disciplines, such as anthropology, but is not suitable for our own. In the minds of many of our peers, it tends to be equated with a “squishy,” barefoot empiricism that blunders around haphazardly collecting anecdotes. Students not only aren’t trained in it, but don’t even get a sense of what it is, or that it’s available to them as a legitimate way to pursue answers to questions they wish to ask. Finally, all this means that less good work in this tradition is produced than would otherwise be the case, and consequently our collective understanding of politics is that much the poorer.

I believe an appropriate step forward would be for researchers who use these methods—either exclusively or in combination with other methods—to work toward building a coalition or users group within the discipline and within the broader qualitative methods section. This enterprise would start by identifying common ground in a related set of *approaches to the gathering of sources, evidence, and data*. This would, one hopes, cross-cut and set aside underlying epistemological divides.

It often feels indulgent to propose new terminology, but it strikes me that an umbrella term to bring together a set of related methods might be useful. One such term would be *site-intensive methods* (SIM), referring to the collection of evidence from human subjects within their own contexts, their interaction with which informs the study just as the researcher’s own questions do. This implies the need for a deeper engagement with a site, context, locality, or set of informants than is obtained in, for instance, telephone surveys or some types of one-time interviews—though other kinds of surveys and interviews in fact require considerable stage-setting and trust-building.³ This term would subsume most of what is referred to as “ethnography” and “participant observation,” and perhaps some forms of other practices, like focus groups. It would also highlight the diverse forms that this research takes, including studies that strive for a high degree of depth in a single locale, as well as those that also aim for breadth as well, and projects in which SIM is the main course, so to speak, as well as others where it is more of a side dish.

I reluctantly suggest some new term like SIM in part because I’m not convinced that other categories are up to the task of bringing together the most useful and productive group of researchers within political science. “Ethnography” on its own has the advantage of a long pedigree within the social sciences and a voluminous methodological literature, especially in anthropology. But it may have drawbacks as well.

Some versions of the anthropological model may set the bar too high in implying that months or years of immersion are required in order to obtain insights. It may imply a holistic orientation according to which the entirety of a community or locale must be comprehended in order to make sense of any one part. It should be pointed out that the meaning and practices of ethnography today are undergoing evolution and sharp debate; by no means do all practitioners see ethnography as limited to these forms.⁴ Nonetheless, the term seems to me problematic as applied to projects employing shorter stints of fieldwork and less encompassing modes of information-gathering.

“Participant observation” would also seem to be a possible umbrella term. Yet here, too, the boundaries implied by this concept may not be co-terminous with what it is we want to bring together. On the one hand, the researcher “participates” in other kinds of research, such as straight-up interviews. Conversely, to some it may imply that only through a long-term process in which the researcher becomes a part of community life can full or meaningful participation be achieved. Some may feel that this covers only a subset of the practices comprised by ethnography, while others see the two concepts as interchangeable.

Finally, there are those who favor the term “narrative methods” (Laitin 2002, 2003), but I see this as both too broad and too narrow for present purposes. As Laitin uses the term, it includes all manner of case studies, interviews, and other qualitative work. Moreover, even if unintentionally, it seems to reinforce the belittling notion that this type of research is “just a bunch of stories.” It does not do justice either to deeper forms of “thick” knowledge that might be achieved through ethnography, nor to the fact that site-based field research can be used to acquire “thin” data points as well as narratives and other types of evidence.

At the outset, I noted that two studies by Fenno and Scott might be the most widely read examples of site-intensive methods in political science. Reflecting on these books, in particular, provides an opportunity to consider what it might take to promote an initiative within the discipline that incorporates and promotes both types of research. Viewed from one perspective, they can be seen as strongly contrasting, perhaps almost polar opposites in their approach. Scott describes his project as a “close-to-the-ground, fine-grained account of class relations” (p. 41) in a Malaysian village, population 360, that goes under the pseudonym of Sedaka. Situating his methods in the ethnographic tradition of anthropologists (pp. xviii, 46), Scott states that he spent at least 14 months in Sedaka, interviewing, observing, and taking part in village life.

Fenno’s work was motivated by questions concerning the relationship between representatives and those they claim to represent: “What does an elected representative see when he or she sees a constituency? And, as a natural follow-up: What consequences do these perceptions have for his or her behavior?” (p. xiii). His approach was to spend time in the company of members of the U.S. Congress in their home districts. He famously characterizes his research method as “largely

one of soaking and poking—or just hanging around,” and situates it explicitly within the tradition of participant observation as practiced by sociologists and other political scientists; ethnography is not mentioned, as far as I can tell (pp. xiv, 249, 295). In the text of the book and its long methodological appendix, Fenno candidly and rather self-deprecatingly explains his *modus operandi* of accompanying politicians wherever they would let him tag along, building rapport, recording their remarks, and asking questions when possible.⁵ Clearly this is a much “thinner” form of engagement with a research milieu than Scott’s village study. Relative to a single-site project, Fenno traded depth for breadth, studying eighteen different representatives and thus obtaining substantial variation on characteristics such as party affiliation and seniority (pp. 253-254). The total time Fenno spent with each representative ranged from three working days to eleven, averaging six (pp. xiv, 256), and some of those days the research subject was available only part of the time.⁶

Despite their differences, these books can readily be seen as belonging to a common category. Both scholars were propelled into the field by strongly theoretical motivations—theories of hegemony and false consciousness in one case, and theories of representation in the other. In both instances, the researchers identified an empirical subject of key importance where (at least as they portrayed it) existing accounts relied on assumptions that ought to be tested or fleshed out through on-the-ground study.

Whether “site-intensive methods” or some other label proves best,⁷ the underlying idea is that practitioners of this overlapping, closely related family of methods ought to do more to talk to one another—within the political science context. We in this field are fortunate to benefit from a wide selection of examples and methodological texts from other disciplines too numerous to cite properly here. We should absolutely make the most of this material. But the development and communication of these methods within our own departments and conferences and journals is important in its own right.

The purpose would not be to try to impose a consensus on a diverse set of researchers with varying ideas and commitments concerning the philosophy of science behind what they do. Rather, it would pursue some of the following goals:

Encourage the creation of clear statements of what is meant by this research and the ways in which it can be used to address theoretical topics in our discipline. Individual researchers will differ on the meaning or status of theory, but there can be no doubt that this is the touchstone by which work is judged in political science today. The full range of purposes that can be served through site-intensive methods is beyond the scope of this essay, but they include collecting data that can be quantified and subjected to numerical analysis, gathering qualitative measures of the observable implications of hypotheses, collecting information that sheds light on causal processes, checking the plausibility and validity of theoretical claims, and refining analytic categories for use with other methods.

Relatedly, explain in straightforward terms the circumstances under which SIM is particularly valuable—indeed,

necessary—for political research. One way to think about this is that such methods are of particular value when what we're studying is subtle (for example, relationships, networks, identities, styles, beliefs, or modes),⁸ and when what we're studying is sensitive, hidden or otherwise kept behind barriers that require building trust or otherwise unlocking access. Scott's and Fenno's projects serve again as examples. In both books, the fundamental subject of study was individuals' *perceptions* (peasants' views of class relations and politicians' views of their constituents). These perceptions are both subtle and, most of the time, hidden. This fact made forms of research like surveys and short interviews unworkable and necessitated strategies involving trust-building and over-time observation..

Discuss how best to teach these methods. To some, ethnography and the like may appear virtually unteachable. It may seem that each individual can learn how to do these things only by doing it him- or herself, and that the practical problems faced by students in their specific research sites will be virtually unique and impossible to prepare for in advance. But I believe this position is far too pedagogically pessimistic. It also understates the extent to which there is a set of coherent principles and techniques that underlie (even if sometimes implicitly) what ethnographers and participant observers do. This, in turn, reinforces marginality. Certainly, my colleagues and I who have co-taught the APSA short course on field research methods feel that reflecting on these methods has made us better and more efficient at using them ourselves.⁹

Develop principles for managing the trade-offs involved in site-based research. How many sites should be developed in a given project? (Would *Weapons* have been more compelling or less compelling if it had involved multiple village sites? What if Fenno had tracked just four politicians, but spent months with each instead of days?) What is the minimum, or optimal, degree of access required to obtain valid information for a particular research effort?

Identify the most fruitful ways of integrating site-intensive work into multi-method studies. In my own work on local associations in China and Taiwan, for example, I have adopted an approach that pairs the deeper insights from participant-observation and interviews with thinner but more extensive survey data.

Address the topics raised by Morris MacLean in her contribution to this issue: how not merely to obtain adequate informed consent from human subjects but possibly engage them in more active and participatory ways. Similarly, explore the particular problems discussed by Cammett here about presenting oneself and building access in divided or otherwise challenging settings.

Create a bibliography, accessible online, of work in political science that uses site-intensive methods.

It is at least as exciting to see the continued emergence of new work in this category as it is to reread classics of the field. Just as the organization of the broader Qualitative Methods section itself has been an immensely constructive step, I would urge the subset of those interested in ethnography and participant observation to think collectively about ways to pro-

mote these invaluable and closely related approaches to learning about the political world.

Notes

¹ The symposium in the Spring 2006 issue of this newsletter, "Ethnography Meets Rational Choice," is a worthwhile example.

² <http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/IQRM2006syllabus.html>

³ See Posner (2004) and Cammett's contribution to this newsletter.

⁴ Marcus (1998), for example, provides arguments in support of multi-sited studies, albeit with reservations.

⁵ He also discusses his methods in a 1986 *APSR* article and other essays, all reprinted in Fenno (1990).

⁶ One could go on about the contrasts. Scott is, of course, particularly attuned to the voices and experiences of the subaltern, while Fenno does not conceal an often admiring sympathy for the elites that he studies.

⁷ Perhaps this category could simply be called E/PO, but at risk of confusion with the hormone erythropoietin, central to recent doping scandals in sports.

⁸ And most things I can think of in the realm of politics contain subtleties that probably deserve up-close scrutiny. At the same time, this is not at all to deny that less-intensive methods can also shed light on these topics.

⁹ To be sure, site-intensive methods are just one component of what has been taught in this course.

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The Power of Human Subjects and the Politics of Informed Consent

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One of the key challenges and rewards of doing ethnographic or "site-intensive" fieldwork is negotiating our relationship with the individuals, groups and societies we study during the process of this in-depth, close-up, on-the-ground research. Before we gain entrée as observers, and frequently participants, in the everyday lives of individuals and communities, we must consider how to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of our research. Drawing on methodological discussions ongoing in other disciplines, I urge a reconsideration of the process of informed consent, less as an externally-imposed, bureaucratically-mandated hurdle, and more as the initial step in a more collaborative approach to research where subjects have a great deal more power.

Most of us are aware of the notorious studies from the past where the risks and benefits to human subjects were barely considered, if at all, and participants suffered a grave psychological or physical toll. Perhaps the most egregious example is of course the Tuskegee Syphilis study (1932-1972). During this study, power differentials based on race and class led the U.S. Public Health Service to continue to observe the progression of syphilis in impoverished, African-American men, despite an accepted, known cure for the disease. The cost to human subjects in this case was huge and blatantly obvious: the majority of the study participants needlessly suffered, died, and/or infected their families with the disease.

As a direct result of the media exposé of the injustices at Tuskegee, the federal government, since the late 1970s, has required all researchers to comply with federal regulations protecting human subjects. We generally accept and view these overarching principles as legitimate. But we have also experienced, personally and/or vicariously, numerous horror stories of impractical—nay impossible!—demands of well-intentioned but unyielding university human subjects committees who seem to have little understanding of the social sciences and no inkling of our particular field site contexts. Many scholars tend to think of this process of obtaining human subjects clearance from our universities and informed consent from our subjects as a bureaucratic hurdle to be overcome before the "real work" begins.

I would like to propose an alternative, perhaps somewhat controversial, viewpoint. Informed consent is more than managing to persuade our campus human subjects committees to approve a form, or a one-shot interaction in the field trying to get a respondent to participate in your survey. Instead, we should think much earlier and more broadly about how to create and communicate real benefits from our work for the affected individuals and communities. While this proposal may seem radical in political science, a growing number of scholars from a variety of other disciplines have already highlighted how a more participatory approach to research can produce improved outcomes for all involved (Kelly 2005, Kidd and Kral 2005, Dreze 2002, Chataway 2001, Reason and Bradbury 2001, Fals-Borda 1997, Park 1992). The idea is that research is a partnership between the investigators and the subjects studied. Researchers need the local knowledge and information possessed by individuals and communities, and communities may benefit from the knowledge and insight provided by the researcher. Together, they collaborate to identify the most salient research puzzles, and the most appropriate and efficient way of investigating them. In this mode, the process of informed consent begins at the initial stage of question formulation and continues through the implementation of data collection, analysis, and outreach.

By resisting the "superpower model of research" and allowing our human subjects the power to speak prior to the first interview, the projects we conduct will be more relevant to the individuals and communities we study. This model not only has some normative value in being fundamentally more democratic, but the voluntary and potentially more enthusiastic involvement of the study participants will undoubtedly improve